

Teaching Methods of Miss Charlotte Mason.¹

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I.

SOME remarkable work is being done in a growing number of public elementary schools, whose teachers have adopted the methods of Miss Charlotte Mason, to which they have been introduced by the missionary enterprise of the Parents' National Educational Union. Those who have seen that work cannot speak too highly of the results that are being achieved. Teachers and children who have once mastered the methods will have no other. They are good judges—perhaps the best. It is time that we listened to what they have to tell us, time that we did due honour to the prophet in our midst.

Prophets, of course, are seldom recognised for what they are by their contemporaries. To them they are heretics to be silenced. They are altogether too disturbing. They bid us leave the quiet pleasant ways to which we are accustomed, to discard the texts and formulae that come so trippingly off our tongues, to desert the old familiar altars of our worship. They call upon us to take heart and follow them by difficult and lonely tracks into the unknown, to accept another gospel, to build new altars. That the contemporary will seldom do. So the great educational reformers cry in the wilderness, and pass unheeded till the day of their children's children. This later generation never heard the teacher's living voice. The tradition reaches them distorted, as tradition always is. They are filled with zeal, but they misunderstand. Some accident, some unessential becomes a capital article of faith. Then they build new altars, and impose some soul-destroying [sic] ritual, and write big books. They marvel at the obtuseness of their predecessors, and tell themselves that

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they could never have been so dull of hearing or so hard of heart. So easy is it to be wise and magnanimous at the expense of our predecessors. Only the prophet of our own day knows how deaf and stubborn we ourselves can be.

Miss Mason will be recognised by another generation as a great educational reformer. The writers of books on education and the masters of method of that day will have much to say about her. They have obscured or distorted the meaning of many a healing message in the past, and they will obscure hers. It would be well if we would listen to the prophet herself, while she is among us, and learn from her.

Miss Mason starts from common ground. We all admit the failure to get interest. Too many of our pupils will not listen to us, and do not appear to want to learn. Miss Mason tells us that they ought not to have to listen to us, and it is just because we make them do so that they are not interested and do not learn. She gets interest. Her methods have been tried with every type of school and child and teacher, and they have succeeded everywhere, even in a cheerless and neglected little country school that for years had been almost inefficient, and that was selected for that very reason. No one could say that that was anything but stubborn and unlikely soil.

Let Miss Mason tell us how it is done.

“It has come to us of the Parents’ Union School,” she says, “to discover great avidity for knowledge in children of all ages and of every class, together with an equally remarkable power of attention, retention, and intellectual reaction upon the pabulum consumed. The power which comes into play in the first place is, of course, attention, and every child of any age, even the so-called ‘backward’ child, seems to have unlimited power of attention which acts without mark, prize, place, praise, or blame. This fact, clearly recognised, opens great possibilities to the teacher; though his first impulse be to deny statements which seem to him sweeping and absurd.”

Sweeping and absurd, no doubt, the statements seem, when we recall the lessons we have given and the children we have taught. But many a teacher will bear witness that they are literally and exactly true.

“We have made, too,” says Miss Mason, “a rather strange discovery—that the mind refuses to know anything except what reaches it in more or less literary form. It is not surprising that this should be true of children and persons accustomed to a literary atmosphere, but that it

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should be so of ignorant children of the slums points to a curious fact in the behaviour of mind.”

And again.

“Mr. Fisher says, ‘there are books and text-books,’ and the day is at hand when we shall all see that the latter are of no educational value.”

Some teachers of science have protested, but Miss Mason has her answer.

“We have a contention with some teachers of science who maintain that a child can only learn what he discovers for himself *de novo*. The theory is plausible, but the practice is disappointingly narrow and inexpansive. The teacher has got his knowledge through books; why, then, are they taboo for the children? ... The French scientists know better; they perceive that as there is an essence of history which is poetry, so there is an essence of science to be expressed in exquisite prose. We have a few books of this character in English, and we use them in [sic] the P.U.S in conjunction with field work and drawing—a great promoter of enthusiasm for nature.”

Who that has read the charming books of Henri Fabre but will agree?

Now we get at the heart of the method.

“Give the children the sort of knowledge that they are fitted to assimilate, served in a literary medium, and they will pay great attention. What next? ... Here we have a word of ancient wisdom for our guidance: ‘The mind can know nothing except what it can express in the form of an answer to a question put by the mind to itself.’ Observe, not a question put by an outsider, but put by the mind to itself. We all know the trick of it. If we want to tell the substance of a conversation, a sermon, a lecture, we ‘go over it

in our minds' first, and the mind puts its question to itself, the same question over and over again, no more than—What next? and lo, we have it, the whole thing complete! We remember how one of Burke's pamphlets, by no means light affairs, was told almost verbatim at a college supper. We admire such a feat, and think it quite out of our reach, but it is the sort of thing that any boy or girl of fifteen could do if allowed to *read the pamphlet only once*; a second reading would be fatal, because no one can give full attention to that which he has heard before and expects to hear again. ... Let the child ...

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tell what he has read in whole or in part on the instant, and again in an examination paper months later."

It is here that teachers are apt to go wrong. "My children." [sic] say the hasty and self-confident, "my children read to themselves, and reading is followed by narration. There is nothing new in this." Perhaps not. But let us be quite clear. Does the child *always* learn from the book? Does narration *always* follow? Is there never more than the one reading? Is the examination, months later, faced by the child with a joyous confidence that astounds each teacher who witnesses for the first time the extraordinary result? We all have our Abana and Pharpar where we fain would wash, but only in Jordan, distant and despised, can we find healing. "But how are we to know that we *shall* find it there?", some doubting souls perhaps may ask. "Are we," they will say, "to take Miss Mason's bare word for it?" No, they need not. They may go and see for themselves that it is so—see and marvel, as the writer has done. But let a teacher speak, one of dozens whose written reports tell the same tale. His is a country school.

"The most pleasing fact of all," he says, "has been the eagerness among the older scholars to narrate, a thing I could never get them to do previously, and, greatly to my astonishment, scholars I thought to be almost helpless are in many cases the most exact and fluent narrators. Because of the oral work the scholars have enlarged their vocabularies, can express their ideas more exactly, and exercise a greater amount of intelligence in answering problems and questions based upon the work studied."

"It is wonderful," says another, "how the expression in written work has improved, and what quantities will be written."

That extraordinary change in the "almost hopeless" is testified to again and again.

"What has surprised us most," says the Head Master of a big Boys' School, "is the ready way boys absorb information, and become interested in literature which we have hitherto considered outside the scope of primary school teaching. A year ago I could not have believed boys would read Lytton's 'Harold,' Kingsley's 'Hereward,' and Scott's 'Talisman' with real pleasure and zest, or would study with understanding and delight Shakespeare's 'Macbeth,' 'King John,' and 'Richard II.'; but experience has shown that we had underrated the abilities and tastes of the lads we should have known better."

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And many of the children bear delightful testimony. "The 'Talisman' is very hard indeed, but it is ever so interesting," says a girl of twelve; and another tells how "We were sorry the play of 'King John' did not come in time for us to be able to read it—we simply enjoyed 'Macbeth.'"

To the doubter, then, may we not well say, "We do not ask you to accept our word. Go and see"?

"Self-taught children," said *The Times*, reporting briefly a few weeks ago a meeting at which some account was given of what is being done in Secondary Schools. Well, under skilled direction, they are at least allowed to teach themselves, and they like doing it. They do not want us to get in the way. When we insist on getting in the way, as we commonly do, many of them simply retire into their shells like so many irritated snails. Let Miss Mason explain once more.

"The message of our age is, Believe in mind, and let education go straight as a bolt to the mind of the pupil. The use of books is a necessary corollary, because no one is arrogant enough to believe he can teach every subject in a full curriculum with the original thought and exact knowledge shown by the man who has written a book on perhaps his life study. But the teacher is not moved by arrogance, but by a desire to be serviceable. He believes that children cannot understand well-written books, and that he must make himself a bridge between the pupil and the real teacher, the man who has written the book.

"Here, again, we think we have been of some use.

"We have proved that children, even children of the slums, are able to understand any book suitable for their age ... Given a book of literary quality suitable to their age, and children will know how to deal with it without elucidation. ... Let the boy read and he knows, that is, if he must tell again what he has read."

And again—

"The mass of knowledge, evoking vivid imagination and sound judgment, acquired in a term from the proper books, is many times as great, many times more thoroughly visualised by the scholars, than had they waited upon the words of the most able and effective teacher. This is why we insist upon the use of books. It is not that teachers are not eminently capable, but because information does not become knowledge unless a child perform the 'act of knowing' without the intervention of another personality."

But, of course, this turns the teaching tradition upside

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down. And none too soon. The teaching tradition was founded when there were no printed books. It dates from the day of manuscript, and it was powerfully reinforced a hundred years ago by the great pioneers of elementary education, who could afford no books, or next to none, for their large classes. Even within the memory of many men and women, who are still teaching, three books a year (little text-books of poor quality), were the meagre allowance of the child in the elementary school. The teacher had to talk; there was no other way. With great skill the Training College equipped him for the task. It is proud of what it did, and so is he. And

they are rightly proud; but they ought not to have had to do it, and now that it no longer need be done, now that books can be provided (they cost more, of course, than the elementary school, even in these days, has been used to spend) there should be an end of "chalk and talk."

The popular estimate of the teacher has been very irritating, but it has not been wholly unjust. In the general eye he is an autocrat, slightly severe, rather inclined to repress inconvenient initiative, to set one pace which all must keep. His foible is omniscience; his word is law. Children (and, very often, adults) must listen to him with respect and above all in silence. It is for him to fill the stage; they are but the crowd. That, with just a touch of caricature, describes, not unfairly, what the long tradition of oral teaching has made him. Miss Mason's teachers leave the stage to the child and the book. They are but the prompters in the wings. They speak when they are needed. It is the child who is all-important. Joyfully (and there is a new joy in their faces) they serve him, and by serving learn the last secret of their art.

II.

In a previous article the leading principles that underlie Miss Mason's methods were set forth; for the most part in her own words. The passages quoted were taken from one of her most recent pamphlets, "A Liberal Education in Secondary Schools." Nothing could be clearer or more suggestive than they are. But difficulties arise when the first attempt is made to apply new principles to working conditions, and few teachers who were not already familiar with Miss Mason's work would find it possible to adopt her methods without further explanation. There are quite a number of difficulties, some real, some imaginary, that have to be faced and overcome. Fortunately, if one is faithful to Miss Mason's principles, they are soon overcome. The writer has had many opportunities of seeing and hearing

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what they are. He is only an administrator now, but once he was a teacher, and his fellow teachers of to-day are kind to him and tell him many things, that without their help he would never learn. Some part of what he has learnt from them about the working of Miss Mason's methods he will try to pass on to others.

At the outset there was some uneasiness about the examination that comes at the end of every term. The record of examinations in the primary school is not a good one. Those who remember what they once were, want no more. Examinations they say, must lead to cramming. These examinations, however, do not. They cannot if the method is followed faithfully. The child reads the book once ("a second reading," you will remember, "would be fatal"), narrates what he has read in whole or part on the instant, and again in an examination paper months later, [sic] No revision is attempted: it is unnecessary, and the syllabus is so full that there is no time for it. So cramming is impossible. "But," some will say, "my children could never work an examination paper under such conditions." Let them try. Their experience will be that of an Assistant Mistress, who has a class of eight-year-old girls. "Miss Mason's scheme," she writes, "is at present one of great surprises. We did not take any examination at the end of the summer term (the first), and many sighs were uttered and great dread felt when we heard we were taking the Christmas Examination. The feelings of utter helplessness and chaos grew worse as the dreaded Monday morning came. There was no relief when the questions came, many of which were on the first lessons of the term. The teacher stood before the class and

gave out the first examination, a history question on the very first story told in the last week of August.

“For a moment or two there was a blank. Then one by one the children pulled themselves together, and gathered up from the backs of their memories with most wonderful results. Hardly a tiny detail was missing by the time they had finished. After the first plunge the teacher breathed, and each examination was waited for with greater and greater serenity.”

Of course, after this, it is not surprising to learn that the children themselves like the examinations. They always like doing difficult things that they discover to be within their power. Even the seven-year-olds take their share, dictating their answers for the most part, either to their teacher or to some older scholar who has been sent in to help.

The examination papers are set by Miss Mason herself. The same papers are worked all over the world by children in

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schools of many types, from many kinds of homes. There is a bond between all these children, a very real bond that works for good. Children born and bred under the most diverse conditions have common interests, the interests that arise from common studies, common tastes. They are reading the same books, learning the same poetry, acting the same plays, studying the same pictures. When they meet in after-life, the tiresome class barriers that only exist [sic] where there are no common interests, will vanish. Those who have been Miss Mason’s children will be able to talk to one another about all that they have in common, as boys or girls who have been through any other famous school.

“Reading the same books!” says someone. “[sic] How can that be? Surely we can choose our own books?” No, Miss Mason chooses them. If she did not, the examination would be impossible, the essential interweaving of the subjects would be imperilled, the bond of union between all the schools and all the children would be dissolved. There comes down each term a printed programme for each class, with its lists of books and the amounts to be read. Those programmes are the fruit of a life’s study. They have been carefully worked out, and experimented with. Each item has its relation to the rest. They are the suggestions which a great teacher offers to her fellows. However strange it may seem, they are welcomed. After all we are not so unaccustomed to having books prescribed for our use. Are there not syllabuses and examinations well known to all of us, that at one time or another, as pupil or teacher, we have followed without protest, though perhaps protest would not have been wholly undeserved? Let us take heart.

It is not possible to print in full a programme for a term, but let us glance at some of the books which Form II. A and B (Standards IV. and III.) used during the autumn term.

For English History they were reading Arnold Forster’s “History of England,” pp. 326–396 (1547–1603). The contemporary French History was being studied in Mrs. Creighton’s “First History of France,” pp. 157–189. At the same time the class were reading “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” and Scott’s “Kenilworth,” and were learning Macaulay’s “Armada.” The two histories, of course, are always in the programme: the other books change term by term to suit the period that is being studied.

For Geography they were reading Book III., pp. 83–122, of The Ambleside Geography Books (chapters on some of the English counties), and some books of travel, adventure, and sea-warfare. For Natural History, “The Sciences,” by E. S.

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Holden, pp. 149–182; “The Changing Year,” by F.M. Haines, August to December; and “Life and Her Children,” by Arabella Buckley, pp. 261–301, were being used.

Some first lessons in Citizenship were being learned from Plutarch’s “Lives,” Solon being the life studied. If Form II. B was working separately it was using Mrs. Beesly’s “Stories from the History of Rome,” pp. 33–61 instead.

For Picture Study a characteristic, and with the children, a favourite subject, little reproductions of six pictures by Israels and Mauve were being used. This term they have Van Dyck.

But we cannot follow the programme further. Enough has been given to serve for illustration; enough to provoke a score of questions. Let us deal with a few of them.

Does every child have all of these books? Not all. Some, e.g., Plutarch’s “Lives,” and “The Changing Year,” are intended to be read aloud to the children by the teacher. Most of the others are intended for the children’s use, but even a generous education committee will hardly be able to provide them all. The “History of France,” therefore, will probably be read aloud by the teacher, and very likely “The Sciences,” as well. Arnold Forster costs 8s. a copy, and probably at first you will have to do with one book between two children, and make the books serve Form III. as well. There are ways of managing, and the teacher who wishes to adopt the method will not be left unaided.

“These books,” it will be said, “are very hard, much too hard for the children of a village school.” Experience has proved that they are not. They seem hard at first, though not even then impossibly hard, to children who were not entered to the method at the beginning; to a child who began in the lowest form they offer no difficulty but what it will face with confidence. Arnold Forster, of course, is not easy reading; and in a junior school, which has been following the method for four or five terms, the writer was told a few weeks ago that the staff thought that it would be better for Standard III. (the top class) to drop the work of Form II. B, and be content with that of Form I. A. While they all loved Shakespeare (for, unspoiled by notes, no other writer is so universally enjoyed), Arnold Forster was thought to be beyond them. It is useless to ask for too much, so he assented; and then, to his secret joy, the two class teachers began to wonder whether after all the change would be wise, for A and B and C and D would be so disappointed. They were interested, and had been asking to be allowed to take the books home. Think of it! Boys in Standard III. wanted to read Arnold Forster’s history at home! That is one little illustration of what the method does.

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Plutarch and Scott are both of them difficult for children of nine and ten, but much of the difficulty is really created by teachers who have not quite grasped the secret of the method, and who forget how they themselves began to read. We did not as children check at each hard word, each passage that was obscure to us, in our “Treasure Island.” We read on, content to get the story. And as we read book after book we gained power and mastered the difficulties unconsciously. It was very seldom that we paused to ask for help. But on this point let us hear a wise teacher who has been following the method for two years.

“Among the subjects new to teachers and scholars,” he says, “the study of citizenship through Plutarch’s “Lives” seems to have presented difficulty. In some instances this is due to the difficult sentences of the translation. . . . This difficulty has been overcome to a certain

extent by greater acquaintance with the style of the writing; but more so, however, by a recognition of two things. First, that to explain the meaning of the words destroys interest in the story and annoys the child. Second, that in many instances it is unnecessary. Although a child's dictionary knowledge of the meaning of the words is lacking, it does not follow that the meaning of a sentence or paragraph is unknown to him. . . . Neither is the correct employment of the words beyond him in writing or narrating."

The same thing happened with Scott's "Talisman," which they were reading that term. "In two forms," he says, "the teachers set out with the purpose of taking it chapter by chapter, dwelling on the explanations of the meaning of the words. The result was disappointing. Mechanical progress was slow and laboured. Interest in the *story* was killed. Written tests showed little grasp of the story, and in spite of such careful digging in the sentences the gold remained hidden. I suggested letting the children read silently—testing by narration—and then written tests; and then only in those parts where the incident and description were likely to appeal. Only such explanation was given as was asked for by the children, or which was likely to bring into greater clearness some necessary point. The results were much better. The children imagined the characters and pictured the incidents for themselves. The Third Crusade, its incidents and actors, became something more than a chapter in Arnold Forster's history. Written tests showed that the author had been followed, and in reproducing his story the children reproduced his words."

We *will* interfere too much, forgetting Miss Mason's warn-
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ing, and making of ourselves an unnecessary "bridge between the pupil and the real teacher, the man who has written the book." Another student of Miss Mason's methods gives us the result of her experience. "In the schools," she says, "where the teachers do not explain and interpret, but let the knowledge make its own appeal, the children prove their natural capacity to understand."

Let us have faith in them. Our troubles generally arise because we forget what Miss Mason has told us.

The full development of the power of narration calls, of course, for skill and judgment on the part of the teacher. One needs to see a good teacher take a lesson. The first attempts are humble, but the amount that is read before narration follows soon rises from a sentence to a paragraph, a page, or with the older children, considerably more. With large classes every child cannot narrate at each lesson but all are ready to narrate. Many will contribute points that the narrators omit, and help to build up the story. Some children are extraordinarily exact narrators, reproducing the writer's very words in many passages. But it is no mere parrot memory that is brought into play, for both the knowledge and the vocabulary become the child's own. They are, as it were, fused in his mind. They are at his command, and reappear at the most unlikely times.

The effect upon the composition of all this reading of good books followed by narration is nothing short of startling. The quantity that even children in Standard III. will write is beyond belief. Equally beyond belief are the wealth of language, the feeling for style and rhythm, the reasoned sense of order ("What next?"), the kindling imagination, the love of literature, the beginnings of a perception of what wide reading means.

Of course, this looks like the exaggeration of an enthusiast possessed by a new idea, [sic] To such a charge the writer can only reply, as he has replied before, "Go and see." He believes that many of the children of ten to twelve years of age in primary schools that are following the method, are racing ahead of their fellows in secondary schools who come from favoured homes. No one can say of them what is so often said of the children from the primary school, that they come up to the secondary school unable to study when left to themselves.

But enough. There are many other things to say, but they must be left unsaid. They all point the same way. One thing, however, must not be omitted, and that is that those who wish to adopt the method will get the individual help that is essential, if they write to the Secretary of the Parents' National Educational Union, at 26, Victoria Street, London, S.W. Those who know and honour Miss Mason will be their ready helpers.

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III.

THE AMBLESIDE METHOD AND SECONDARY EDUCATION²

THE writer has already upon several occasions directed attention to the remarkable results that are being obtained in a number of public elementary schools, which are following the programmes and employing the methods of Miss Charlotte Mason. Much interest is being taken in the work which those schools are doing. They receive many inquiries and many visits. Naturally, however, a still greater interest attaches to the source from which the methods and their inspiration are derived—the Secondary Training College and the Practising School conducted by Miss Mason herself at the House of Education at Ambleside. The writer has on two occasions spent some delightful days there as Miss Mason's guest. He has watched the work done by the students and the children, and he would like to put on record something of what he saw.

Two of the lessons that he saw were of great interest, and, so it seemed to him, of much significance to all who are concerned with secondary education. The first was a French lesson given to the second-year students by the French mistress, a native of Tournai, who came to Ambleside in 1915. She had been teaching in England for some years, but had not previously come into contact with Miss Mason's methods. Those methods were exactly followed during the lesson. There was the book of recognised literary merit, the single reading, and the immediate narration—of course in French. The book was Alphonse Daudet's "Lettres de Mon Moulin," and the story read was "La Chèvre de M. Seguin." Before the reading began, a few—a very few—words of explanation were given—of course, in French. Then the nine pages of the story were read straight through by the mistress, without pause or interruption of any kind, as the same pace that one would read an English story. The students followed by ear only: they had no books. As soon as the reading ended, on the instant, without hesitation of any kind, narration began in French, different members of the class taking up the story in turn till it was finished. All were good; some astonishingly good. To all French was a tongue in which they could think and speak with considerable facility. Yet the time given to French is two hours and three-quarters a week only. Such results compel attention. It may be added that last year the

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writer heard a history lecture on the reign of Louis XI given in French by the same mistress to the then senior students, and the content of the lecture was narrated in a similar manner, with the same astonishing success, [sic]

The second lesson, a short lesson sandwiched between others as a demonstration for the visitor's benefit, was given by a student to Form V. in the Practising School, girls whose age range from sixteen to seventeen and a-half. The form is reading Browning's "A Death in the Desert." The forty lines beginning, "Go back, far, farther, to the birth of things," were read straight through by the girls in turn, the rest following in their books; and again, without pause or hesitation after the one reading, narration began, and the girls in turn took up the paraphrase of the difficult lines in well chosen language, and with a precision that bore witness to their close attention, and to their thorough understanding of what had been read.

In every class it was the same. The oral narration and the written composition, and "reports" of lessons, were of extraordinary excellence. There had been interest, there had been close concentration, and the result was power, mastery.

Two other features in the methods compel the attention of those who are familiar with the work of the public schools and of the public secondary schools. The first is that interest, attention, and concentration are secured, and all the extraordinary results that flow from them are obtained, "without mark, prize, place, praise, or blame." The second feature is equally arresting and suggestive. There is no evening preparation, and by the whole of that amount the hours are shortened. There is no revision for examination, and the time spent over revision in other schools is saved. The examination at the end of each term is as searching as one could wish, but what is read once and then narrated is known, and no revision is required.

In the elementary schools interest, attention, concentration are as easily obtained; there is the same power, the same mastery. The writer could produce many exercise books and examination papers in literature, history, and geography which, for their facility of expression, their range of vocabulary, and their wealth of ideas, would bear comparison with similar books and papers in any secondary school.

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